

PENUMBRA HOLIDAY ZINE

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MASQUERADE

by hopeless_eccentric

The gala itself dripped with diamonds, though Vespa didn't care about a single show of wealth trailing from the masks and gowns and hands of every socialite and museum donor who danced and drank and buzzed around her like mosquitoes. As much as she pretended to be one of them, her appearance had been made for a very different purpose.

She doubted anyone else was there to rob the museum.

Vespa would much rather be caught with her hand halfway into a glass case than spend a moment longer at the gala. The party drowned in self-important half-celebrities who siphoned away their taxes into museums and got an evening of hedonistic opulence in thanks. If she had been among their number, rather than an infiltrator, she would have at least donated a little more so the party didn't get stuck with a theme.

The guests created a sea of moving black and white and gold between their elaborate costumes and masks. Leaning against a table, Vespa watched them all move, some with grace and others with a distasteful kind of carefree floppiness. Vespa was almost certain they took the phrase 'dance like no one is watching' to heart. Between all the feathers and the swirling of skirts, Vespa thought they looked somewhat like tri-colored birds in their strictly thematic gowns.

She felt a little less like a graceful bird of prey and a little more like a lost duck in her own dress, even if Buddy had assured her she looked beautiful.

As much as she adored the hours spent picking out the gown with Buddy, it was far less practical than her usual heist-wear. The black and cream were strangely reminiscent of a killer whale, a creature Buddy had described as fierce and noble, while Vespa had merely snorted and called them scary dolphins. She felt her lips twitch towards a smile at the memory, even if she wished she had picked a dress that concealed her knife and glass cutter in a manner easier than strapping them to either leg.

More than anything else, Vespa couldn't wait to get out of there. That would have been much easier if not for the masked party guest striding up to her side.

"Hello, darling," the woman greeted as if they were familiar.

"I'm taken," Vespa replied, perhaps a little too gruffly for her disguise. She swallowed and backtracked quickly when the woman blinked in surprise. "Sorry.

She couldn't be here tonight."

"That's a shame," the woman sighed, sounding nearly heartbroken.

"That my partner's not here or that I'm taken?"

"That a woman such as yourself should have to be alone at such a lovely event," the woman mused.

"I'm not alone," Vespa huffed.

"I suppose not," her company beamed. "Is there a name I could call you, darling?"

"Nope."

"Darling it is, then," the woman chuckled from somewhere behind her elaborate mask.

Vespa had taken the gala's eye mask requirement a little less seriously than most of the company. She covered little more than her eyes and nose like a jewel-encrusted parody of a superhero. Her company, on the other hand, seemed all but woven into her face covering, an elaborate mass of black and white and gold. Vespa had to admit, she somehow wore it well. She doubted any other partygoer could make such a number look anything less than gaudy, but the woman had a certain kind of royal poise that did away with any right to question her outfit.

"Would you mind if I led you through this next dance?" The woman interrupted Vespa's thoughts before they could go spinning back to Buddy, who too could wear anything and make it look fashionable.

"I told you," Vespa grumbled, starting to get a bit annoyed. "I'm taken."

"This is quite the coincidence, but—"

"I'm gonna go to the bathroom," Vespa interrupted. "I hope you find someone else to dance with. You probably will. This isn't any kind of insult to you, but I'm not having a great time, and I'm gonna go not have a great time somewhere else."

She turned to storm away, the clicking of her heels getting louder and louder as she pried herself out of the party's grasp.

"Vespa, wait!" She could have sworn she heard from over her shoulder.

Vespa froze, nearly turning. The voice had to have been Buddy's, though she

knew it was impossible. Buddy said she was going to dinner with an old friend that night. That had been the exact reason Vespa had timed the heist the way she did, hoping to make her successful return a happy surprise.

She shook her head. There would be time to worry about it later, she decided, and tore up the gilded staircase that separated the space cleared for the party and the museum above.

The moment she crossed the threshold from the stairs to the balcony, she was no longer a runaway party guest. She was a lady with the world's best glass-cutting technology folded into her skirt and a mission on her mind.

A certain gemstone, bloody red and dripping with legends of a curse, lay within the bowels of the museum. It sat among platinum and white diamond, set in a necklace that swooped and swirled around the jewel. Frankly, if not for the desert star gleaming at the center of the necklace, Vespa wouldn't have minded wearing it herself.

She wasn't stealing it for herself though. The ball and the heist had been thrown in honor of the same occasion. Valentine's Day was an ancient holiday, and more importantly, one Buddy hadn't intended on celebrating. She insisted Vespa's company was a gift in itself, though Vespa was sure a diamond or thirty wouldn't exactly sour the deal.

In a way, that necklace reminded her of Buddy. Both wore class in a way that wasn't gaudy. Both shone brighter than any star could hope to mimic, and both had the kind of poise Vespa was once convinced didn't actually exist. They were razor sharp and crystal clear and so unbearably lovely that they both made Vespa's heart leap in her chest.

She would have had far more time to ruminate on that thought had it not been shattered by footsteps trailing behind her.

Vespa's instincts said to run or hide or turn to fight, but she tensed her jaw and steeled herself instead. For all the approacher knew, she was a party guest who got horribly lost. Perhaps she didn't even know that the museum itself was closed. It was best, for the time being, to appear lost in thought.

"Well," the approacher sighed. "I assume the object of your affections is also within that case?"

"She's home tonight, actually," Vespa replied coldly. "Why do you ask?"

"It's a shame. I was hoping this heist would be rather unimpeded."

Vespa whirled around before the woman could lunge to move past her, that

attempt nearly becoming successful when Vespa's punch flew into the air beside the head of a woman so familiar it left her frozen to the spot.

Between blocks and blows and parries, Vespa recognized the woman as the one who had tried to catch her eye at the ball. An elaborate mask had blocked her face, while a regal looking silk wrap had tucked her hair away. The only part of her Vespa could make out besides the mile high slit up her leg were two dark and blazing eyes.

Vespa remembered catching sight of her at the party and wondering how anyone could wear black and gold and make it look like a wildfire. She moved like an empress, and yet nobody seemed to know her, for if they did, surely they would have stooped to bow and kiss her hand. She had a voice like honey and poise like a goddess, and more importantly, was going to absolutely steal that necklace if Vespa let her guard down.

"You—" Vespa hissed.

"My, darling," the thief mused as Vespa's fist sailed past her head once more. She seemed hardly bothered by the effort it took to catch Vespa's arm and spin her away, "you are quite strong. I do love that in a woman."

"And taken," Vespa huffed, voice coming out a growl as she caught the thief's arm, preventing her from taking another step towards the necklace.

That sea of white and red glinted back at them like the great eye of a security camera. Vespa was nearly regretful she had wired them all off.

"She must be a lucky woman," the thief chuckled through another dodge.

"Nope," Vespa tried not to smile, though she knew it was inevitable as far as thoughts of Buddy Aurinko were concerned. "I am."

"This is exactly—" the thief broke off with a grunt as she freed herself from Vespa's blow with a dancer's twirl, rapid and deadly and as tense as a striking serpent, "what I'm talking about. Are you sure she won't be joining you tonight?"

For a moment, the two of them froze, mere feet apart and catching their breaths. Vespa damned the skirt of her gown and told herself she would only ever wear such a thing for a heist again if it meant acquiring a gift for Buddy.

Even with a decent view of her, Vespa couldn't make out anything else about the irksomely familiar woman. If she could tell anything from her fighting, it was that she would rather die than sink a blow and made an inconvenience of ensuring she never received one. Vespa hadn't taken her for a coward from

the way her teeth audibly bared and she fought like wildfire tearing through a forest, but perhaps she had been wrong.

"Enough games," Vespa finally sighed. "You wanna fight me for that necklace? You're gonna fight me for it."

"Funny," the thief audibly grinned. "I was thinking exactly the same thing."

The thief whipped her skirt aside like an ocean wave tossed by the wind. In that same motion, she ripped a nine-inch blade from the leather strap clinging to her leg like a desperate former lover. She tossed it twice in hand and chuckled delightedly to see that in the time her showmanship required, Vespa's knife had already made the short walk from her sleeve to her hand.

From the sound of it, the thief's knife was half as sharp as her smile.

Vespa would have to appreciate that later, for the woman had already lunged, unfurling like a blooming rose and about to sink her thorn into the air beside Vespa. It seemed that the thief was not aiming for Vespa so much as she was aiming for her knife, though she decided it was best to worry about such things once she was finished with her mission.

Their blades hissed against one another as if trying to keep their voices down. The clanging of metal on metal was a private sound, a hushed argument kept quiet through an unspoken camaraderie. As much as Vespa wanted the necklace and the thief thought she had a chance at fighting her for it, they would much rather not be caught altogether.

The subsequent fight was nearly silent. It seemed to take all of the thief's focus to parry Vespa's strikes, and she had no more room for quips. Only the click of heels on marble echoed through the room, as distantly percussive as the patter of rain on a far-off roof. The strike of their blades was resolutely quiet, refusing to ring past either of their ears and staunchly deciding not to echo.

When the thief lunged for a missed blow, Vespa saw a door of opportunity swing open in real time. She hooked one stiletto-clad foot around the woman's leg and tugged her forward.

The thief fell to the ground with a coughed-out breath, though it seemed she refused to go quietly. She fisted a hand in the front of Vespa's dress and tugged her down as well so the two of them crashed into the marble below, tangled and panting and searching fruitlessly for their weapons.

Vespa opened her mouth to growl out an insult when the thief began to laugh. Her heart stopped. She would have known that sound anywhere, and cursed herself for not knowing it before. Every mannerism and flirtation and

even her poise all fell into place, and even though she had no need of doing so, Vespa reached up and slid her mask away.

"Buddy," she breathed, still panting from their fight.

"I knew you'd get there eventually, love," Buddy grinned up at her with those bright eyes and that blazing smile. "I'm quite humiliated to admit my flirting didn't reveal me earlier."

"What the hell are you doing here?" Vespa choked out as she was hit with the realization of why she had lied to Buddy about her whereabouts.

"Well," Buddy sighed, motioning for Vespa to roll over so she could sit up, "I know neither of us are particular proponents of holidays created for the sake of big businesses, but I was thinking it might be in the true spirit of Valentine's Day to steal you something instead."

"I—" Vespa stammered.

"I know you said you didn't want anything, but I had my eye on a particular necklace," Buddy admitted. "This was meant to be a surprise."

"I mean," Vespa chuckled, "I am surprised."

"And you, darling?" Buddy prompted. "I assume you didn't merely attend the gala for fun?"

"I was, uh—" Vespa cleared her throat, "I was gonna try to steal you that necklace too. I thought the color looked nice, and I know how you feel about spending any money for Valentine's Day, so—"

"What did I ever do to deserve you, darling?" Buddy grinned before another word could leave Vespa's lips.

Anything she would have wanted to say dissipated like smoke from the lips of an old movie star, though it seemed a planet's worth of air had been sucked from her lungs with Buddy grinning at her like that. Even jostled and panting and having just lost an accidental fight, Buddy was a force to be reckoned with. Her smile was as victorious as it was soft, her eyes both alight and caressing Vespa's cheek. There was a duality to Buddy Aurinko between her ferocity and the affection she showed her partner. Vespa would have ruminated on that more if Buddy hadn't kissed her.

The part of Vespa still used to working alone protested against pausing a highstakes heist in a high-security facility such as this, but the part of her rendered wordless and breathless and idiotic by Buddy Aurinko told her nerves to shut up and appreciate the moment. With the taste of Buddy's lipstick and the smell of her perfume going to her head, Vespa's common sense didn't stand a chance.

Kissing Buddy was like catching a supernova in a jar. Vespa had never believed herself to be the kind of woman able to reach a container up to the heavens and pluck a dazzling explosion from the sky like a child catching fireflies, and yet, such a strange and beautiful thing had all but fallen into her arms.

Buddy had always possessed a kind of gravity to her poise. Vespa knew she had been pulled into her orbit long before they had even brushed hands. She had a distinct memory of when she realized that orbit was a decaying one, and that she and that dazzling star were on a collision course. She had expected to burn or melt when such a thing happened, but rather, she had been greeted with a domesticated kind of star, the way fire tames itself into a candle to keep mankind company on dark and cold nights.

Every time she kissed Buddy, she felt like she was crashing into that star all over again.

When they broke, Vespa felt her breath catching for a reason unrelated to a confusing knife fight falling into context. She couldn't bring herself to worry too much about their former circumstances with Buddy looking at her with such a fiery adoration that she felt she could melt on the spot.

"So," Vespa finally began, "are you gonna let me steal that necklace for you or what?"

Buddy sighed with a feigned amount of confliction.

"Darling, the base of the necklace would look so lovely on you," Buddy protested.

"You'd have to strip off a million creds in gemstones for that," Vespa sputtered out.

"Damn the gemstones," Buddy grinned. "I'm not here to steal you a diamond. I'm here to steal you a gift."

Vespa couldn't believe that of all the women in the galaxy, she was lucky enough to be loved by this one.

"Well, I'm here to steal you a diamond," Vespa shook her head as she stood, though she waited to offer Buddy a hand up. Buddy took it, though she hardly put any weight on Vespa's hand, much like a skilled dancer of a few dozen centuries ago.

"Thank you, darling," Buddy smiled. "Are you sure you wouldn't like me to steal something else?"

"Positive," Vespa snorted as her glass cutter emerged from the inside of her skirt.

She made quick work of the case, careful not to set off any sensors, even if she was all but positive that they had been turned off by her base level hacking. Security had been relaxed everywhere but the door of the gala, assuming that a handful of scanners would do the work of an already sparse complex of cameras.

When the glass circle she had carved into the case fell away, she replaced it with one gloved hand. The necklace had a strange weight for its delicate shape, though Vespa assumed it was the kind of weight that came naturally with a few million creds assigned to any particular object.

"Close your eyes," she instructed before turning around.

Buddy had a grin on her face, though her eyes were dutifully shut. For a moment, Vespa couldn't help but pause and appreciate her partner's prowess with a makeup brush, for her eyes glittered like the jeweled wings of a butterfly splayed beneath her brows. A brief urge to press a kiss to the bridge of her nose seized Vespa, but she held herself back to preserve the other surprise.

She didn't waste much time on the necklace's clasp, even though her gloved fingers struggled with the delicate wiring. When she finished, she took a step back and felt herself mirroring Buddy's grin.

"Well? How do I look, Vespa?"

Vespa wished she had words for the way that wine-red gemstone shone against Buddy's collarbone, or the way the diamonds all dulled next to the glowing patch of stardust woven into the shape of a woman. She wished she could somehow pluck words from the air like fruit from a tree and somehow make them into an amalgamation of the wave of warmth in her chest. However, Vespa doubted language could so much as parody what it felt like to see Buddy wearing her gift.

"Open your eyes for yourself, Bud," she chuckled instead.

If Buddy was gorgeous when grinning blindly and waiting to see that gift around her neck, she was even more stunning with her eyes on the necklace and her face lit up in delight.

Buddy was always a practiced individual, so when something messy crossed

her face, Vespa knew it to be genuine. A series of expressions, each adoring and honored and unbearably bright, took their turns on Buddy's face, and as such, Vespa couldn't help but feel her heart clench.

"Half as beautiful as you, my darling," Buddy finally managed, though a smile pulled on her words.

"You want me to put it back?" Vespa joked.

"That is to say it's the most beautiful piece of jewelry I've ever seen," Buddy finished, almost sternly. "It's unfair of me to attempt to compare anything to you."

Vespa pretended her face hadn't gone hot.

"Yeah," she swallowed. "Sure. Whatever you say."

"I love you," Buddy chuckled, affirming her words when she reached for Vespa's hand and squeezed it.

"I love you too, Bud," Vespa returned, trying to quell the waver in her voice at just how invincible she felt with Buddy Aurinko clutching her hand like that.

"Now," Buddy began once more, a knowing grin overtaking her face, "Vespa, will you be my—"

Vespa huffed.

"Valentine?" She jokingly groaned.

"No, of course not," Buddy pretended to be offended. "I was going to ask you to be my accomplice."

"Thank God," Vespa breathed.

"Why don't we find something for me to steal you, then?" Buddy laughed.

Vespa didn't think there was a person strong enough to disagree with that.





MASTER CHEF

by fangirl--extraordinaire

Juno lumbers into the kitchen, sleepy, looking to make breakfast for the crew. He would've preferred to spend the morning in bed, but with the way the rest of the crew had been feeding themselves this week, everyone was in dire need of something a little more nutritious.

He swipes a few of the instant food packet wrappers off the counter, scoffing. Even at his lowest points, he'd never used these old-style Earthian space foods. Truth be told, he wouldn't even know where to find them. Jet had said something about a two-for-one special with the Carte Blanche, which gave Juno nightmares for weeks of the ship burning up and falling to pieces as he'd seen many Earthian ships do in those documentaries he'd slept through in school. But either way, he'd tried it on his first night on the Carte Blanche, was offended by the plain, boring taste, and designated himself Aurinko family chef. Well, perhaps chef was overdoing it—cook would probably be more appropriate—but Rita started using chef interchangeably with boss and it just stuck. Also, it was fun to see Vespa grit her teeth anytime anyone else used the title.

Last week, however, Nureyev had officially relieved him of his chef duties with some excuse about Earthian traditions. Apparently, Ransom had spent some time on one of Earth's satellites, among a society very interested in bringing back ancient Earthian traditions. So, they spent Valentine's Week on surprise dates exploring the planet they were currently docked at. And although he'd spent a good half of the week complaining about hating surprises, he couldn't deny there was something appealing about wandering the streets, hand intertwined with Nureyev's as he led the way; it had been a while since they'd spent that much time without worry of blasters and sirens.

Before he could continue strolling down memory lane, Rita walks into the kitchen, wide awake. He watches her out of the corner of his eye as he takes a pan out of a cabinet. She's wearing a full face of makeup, eyeshadow matching a fluffy, daisy-covered white dress paired with ankle-high white boots.

"What're you doing up so early, Rita?" he asks, focusing back on the pan as he pushes buttons for the right ingredients for pancakes.

The sound that comes out of Rita sounds way too giddy for this time of day. "Just on a call, you know how it is, chef!" He, in fact, does not know how it is but he does know that Rita will launch into an explanation anyway if he doesn't answer, so he doesn't. Weirdly enough, however, she goes to sit down at the

table, humming and fiddling with her comms instead.

"Um, Rita?"

"Yeah?" she answers rather distractedly.

"Never mind." Juno shrugs, turns back to the task at hand as Rita's humming resumes.

Ten minutes later, he's finished a stack of salmon-flavored pancakes, the most disgusting thing he's ever made. He grabs syrup and a fork and brings the plate over to Rita. As he sets the plate in front of her, he remembers to say, "Happy single's awareness day, Rita!" According to Nureyev, it was like a second part to the Valentine's Week to celebrate being single. For some reason. He's not really sure why either of the two holidays were necessary but ancient Earthians were weird.

Rita stares at the pancakes for a second, confused. "What Mista Steel?" He's about to repeat himself when she adds, "But I ain't single?"

"What?"

She squints at him from behind her glasses, a look that she gives him when he's being particularly dense. "Yeah, who did you think Franny was?"

"Your imaginary friend?" he whispers, and breaks out into a coughing fit he's going to blame on the salmon powder.

Rita laughs, "That's hilarious Mista Steel, kinda reminds me of that stream where Georgia Peach falls in love with this person who she thought she imagined but then it turned out they're a ghost and then..." Juno, finally able to breathe normally, goes back to cooking breakfast for the rest of the crew while Rita prattles on.

"So, the _master detective_ didn't know about Rita's partner?" Vespa reaches across the table and punches Juno in the shoulder.

"Hey! Don't forget who's the chef—"

"Ha, chef, that's rich—"

"Vespa, Juno, enough," Buddy cuts in, somehow still looking regal as ever with an exasperated expression on her face. She glances at Vespa while she puts her knife back up her sleeve, and Juno breathes a sigh of relief. "Frankly, I'm not sure how you managed to tune out all of Rita's loud comms calls, Juno, but she seems quite enamored with Franny."

Peter lets out a chuckle, and Juno shoots him a look of betrayal. "Sorry, love, but I thought you knew? It seemed pretty obvious to me."

Juno doesn't even look at Jet, knowing the Big Guy will probably tease him about it later. He starts doing mental calculations on how to avoid the Ruby 7 for a while. Maybe if he volunteers to clean out the closet?

Rita takes a deep breath, and Juno knows she's going to start in on a large rant. He sighs, knowing he should probably listen this time around. "Actually, that first ice cream date, Mom—I mean Captain A was givin' me advice because I was really, really goin' ta miss Franny what with our space adventures and all, so after that, I asked Franny out. It was super romantic, if I do say so myself... see our favorite stream is Abstract Art of a Vampire in Water, and I..."

Juno settles in for a long story, intrigued at how his ex-secretary scored a date.

Later, Rita finds Juno spinning around in a chair in his room. "Hey boss?"

"Yeah, Rita?" He gets up slowly and with a sigh, thinking she needs his help with something.

"I'm sorry I wasn't really clearer with you earlier, chef. I guess I was just kinda scared about how serious it was getting, a-and telling you would make it so much more important!" She's wringing her hands, and her eyes are darting around the room. Juno knows she hasn't been in a relationship like this in a while. Besides, if there's anyone who gets commitment issues, it's Juno Steel, private eye.

Juno lets out a little smile. "And I'm sorry for not listening."

Rita grins and wraps her arms around Juno, trapping his arms under hers. He slowly lays his head down on top of hers, cheek pressed against her dark curls. "I love ya, Mista' Steel."

"I love you, too."





JUNO STEEL AND THE APRIL FOOL

by DS Oswald

Juno Steel and the April Fool

Luck's a rotten thing. It's never on your side when you want it to be and it runs out on you when you most need it.

We're a bit alike, that way. Or— we used to be.

"Darling!"

Nureyev drapes himself over me, one arm comfortably over my shoulder. He brings his other hand up to cup my cheek and turn me towards him. His expression and posture really give meaning to the word *languishing*. He peeks at me through his eyelashes.

"Yeah, Ransom?"

"Oh, my dearest detective, it's horrible," he says, almost as soon as you get your greeting out. "Someone— some horrid little rogue— has done a most foul and terrible deed and I have need of your detective skills."

Immediately, I'm on my guard. Nureyev's definitely not tense enough for it to be anything major, but— "What is it?"

"Come see for yourself!" And as he speaks, Nureyev draws up from me. One of his hands slides down to my upper arm. He pulls me through the halls of the Carte Blanche, speaking as he does so: "My dear, you must be prepared— it's absolutely dreadful in there— the kind of travesty I haven't witnessed in years—I know you'll be able to sort it out, though, Juno..."

I realize that he's taking me down a familiar set of hallways, through the ship to his room. He stops for a moment in front of his door, making a show of pulling himself together. I can't help but smile a little at it.

Nureyev opens the door, and shows me through. "Isn't it tragic?"

I arch my eyebrows, looking around the room. "Uh— what's wrong?" I look around the room, nearly spotless, and add, "I didn't realize you were so good at cleaning up, Ransom."

"That's the problem!" He wails. He puts his hand over his eyes and pretends to faint in my direction. I catch him and push him back up effortlessly, and he

bounces off into his room, spreading his hands. "I don't know where anything is! Someone— someone snuck into my room when I was out talking with Buddy and did this!"

I try my best not to smile, but it's pretty damn hard. "Someone... organized your room? That's the travesty?"

"Yes!" Nureyev spins to face me. His eyes are shining. "Please, Lady Detective— I need to figure out who's done this!"

I roll my eyes. "You're laying it on pretty thick."

Nureyev grins his fox's grin and says, "What? You don't think it would be fun? Just like old times— the two of us solving a mystery together?"

"Just as long as neither of us nearly dies, I think it might be nice," I reply. I look around the room. "And nothing was stolen?"

"No, not a thing— I looked through the drawers and things. I wore gloves, of course— no contamination of the crime scene from me." Nureyev tucks both his hands behind his back and bounces on the balls of his feet.

"You're pretty well-versed in this sort of thing."

"A good thief can think like a detective, Juno."

"Mm." I turn to him, trying to keep the amusement off my face. I'm sure he notices anyways— not that it matters, since I can see the same look on his face. "I guess we should round up some suspects, then. No sign of forced entry... who has access?"

Nureyev puts his hands on my lapels, as though I don't already know the answer, and says, "Well, nearly everyone on the ship— we are, after all, a merry band of thieves." He's close to me, close in a way that still makes me just a little flustered even now. He can tell.

"Just the four, then," I reply. I lean in and kiss him quickly on the lips, then pull away to move down the hall. "Let's get our interrogations started."

Buddy is in her office, which has been almost completely covered in brightgreen sticky notes. Each has something written on them. I catch a few as I glance over the place: <3, happy april fool's, love you.

"I didn't know Vespa did pranks," I say. Buddy looks up from the blueprints she's studying and raises the one eyebrow visible.

"Pranks?" She looks around. "I'm certain I don't know what you mean. My

office looks entirely normal. And if something were out of place it would have been only partly Vespa, because Rita would have given her the idea. Now, what can I help you with?"

Nureyev and I exchange a glance and come quietly to the conclusion that we should keep our focus on the investigation at hand.

"Have you been by Ransom's room lately?" I try to make it sound casual. I make an attempt at brushing some of the sticky notes off one of the chairs in front of Buddy's desk, then sigh and sit down on top of them. Nureyev leans on the back of the chair, arms draped comfortably around my shoulders.

Buddy takes one look at me, then Nureyev, and picks up her blueprints in the same way you might pick up a newspaper. "I'm afraid I haven't, darlings. Is something the matter?"

I watch her react. Buddy isn't the easiest person to read. Bad liars make for bad criminals. But her curiosity seems real. She looks over her blueprints at us and raises an eyebrow.

Nureyev clears his throat, like he's embarrassed. "Someone, ah... rearranged things."

Buddy's attention sloughs off us. It's like a spotlight dimming. She says, "Ah. A prank?"

"I'm afraid so." Nureyev's voice trembles a little when he's being overdramatic on purpose. Vibrato. It's cute.

"Well, I've nothing to do with it," Buddy is saying. "I've been in my office all day."

I frown. "Can anyone confirm that?"

"Vespa. She insisted on walking in here with me when we both woke up for reasons I can't possibly fathom." As she speaks, Buddy raises the blueprints up to hide her face, which I take as a polite sign that we should get going. I look up at Nureyev and raise my eyebrows. He smiles and stands up, waiting for me to join him before we both leave.

"What did you think, detective?" He leans in conspiratorially towards me as we walk towards the medbay, where Vespa probably is.

"I think this means if Buddy did this, Vespa would have to be in on it," I reply. "Though... I don't think Vespa would have helped commit the crime. According to Buddy she was the one who did the office with Rita. Hard to pull off both

those things at once without somebody else noticing." It'd be way safer to use each other for alibis, sharing as little information as possible. It makes for less compromised information during the crime, but afterwards, if you know what you're doing...

"Dear?"

I look up at Nureyev. "I think I have a strategy. Follow my lead."

We walk into the medbay just as Vespa stubs her toe on a cot and lets out an actually pretty impressive set of curses. She's hopping up and down on one foot when she sees us and scowls, sets her leg down. "What."

Nureyev grins. "I suppose even assassins stub their toes."

"You two coming in scared me."

"Bad luck," I supply.

"I should start calling you that, Steel," Vespa snaps. "Things only start going sideways when you turn up."

"Really? Always been the opposite for me," Nureyev says, smiling. He and Vespa look at each other for a moment and the room suddenly feels a few degrees colder. But then Nureyev, ever moving on, says, "Anyways, we won't be in your way for long. Juno just wanted to talk to you..." he trails off, and looks at me expectantly. I didn't have time to fill him in on the plan.

"Right," I say. I straighten my jacket as best I can. "Uh, Vespa, I need ot know your movements this morning."

The assassin's eyes narrow in suspicion. "Why."

"No reason," I say, a little too quickly, and her eyes narrow more. "I'm doing an exercise. Seeing if my detective skills are still sharp."

"You're a bad liar. Steel."

I ignore that I've been caught and press forward. "You walked Buddy to her office this morning, right?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

Not a denial. "After that you went to see Rita," I continue. "And then you came here."

"You putting together a case on me? I haven't done anything."

"So I'm right."

To her credit, Vespa doesn't give anything away. Her gaze retains the same steel she's threatened to kill me with a thousand times since I joined the crew. But, again, luck is not on her side. Something falls from one of the pockets on her pants: square and fluorescent yellow. I smile. She scowls.

"What do you want, anyways?"

I give in. "Someone organized Ransom's room."

Vespa snorts. "Well, it wasn't me."

Nureyev leans against me. I shrug. "I guess we'll see." And then I turn smoothly to walk out of the room. Nureyev follows, wrapping an arm around my waist.

Rita and Jet are together, which saves me some time, and I can see from the snack wrappers they've accrued that they've been sitting in the rec room watching streams since at least least night. Rita looks half asleep, though as we walk in, she sits bolt upright and yells to a serene Jet, "OOOH pay attention! This line's my favorite—" She cuts herself off when she sees me. "Mista Steel! You're just in time! Hurry up, we're almost done with Werewolves in the Time of Dinosaurs 9! In this one, one of the werewolves that had a heroic sacrifice in Werewolves in the Time of Dinosaurs 4 comes back! But he's actually an alternate version of himself, form a different timeline, who got lost in this timeline when the werewolves tried to go back to their own time— ooogh, he has such a good scene with his boyfriend, you gotta watch with us—"

"Ah, sorry, Rita," I say. "Uh, just wanted to ask— did Vespa come through here?"

"Yeah, this mornin'." Rita grins. "But she went to see Buddy after that and now I think she's in the medbay? Why, are you looking for her?"

"Nah, just following up on something. What about everybody else? Seen anyone pass through here on their way to their room last night?"

Rita gets a look on her face like she's preparing to laugh at a joke, then realizes I'm serious. "Uh... everyone? Except me and Jet, we've been here all night."

Right. I mentally kick myself for forgetting that people go to bed at night. "Uh, I mean, after we normally do. Did you hear any weird noises?"

Jet stares evenly at me. "Unfortunately, the streams are very loud," he says.

Rita nods.

"Yeah, and I was kinda talkin' a lot, 'cuz last night we were in the early movies which have a lot of cool little details and I know a lot of the trivia because the last time I stream marathoned *Werewolves in the Time of Dinosaurs* they had these fun little trivia bits and I dunno they just kinda stuck in my head. You ever get that? Some random factoid you just found and it's there in your head for*ever* like, somewhere along the line your brain decided this was important?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Anyways, are you sure you don't wanna watch some with us?"

"Maybe in a bit." I move through the room, taking Nureyev's hand, and we enter the hallway where the bedrooms are. The door shuts behind us, leaving only the muffled sound of the streams and Rita's excited yells.

Nureyev wraps his arms around me. "Well? Have you figured out who did it, my darling detective?"

I break from his hold, just so I can pace a little. I run my hands through my hair. "I... dunno. It could be any of them— I mean, Vespa and Buddy are each other's alibis, and Vespa's definitely not the type, but I can definitely see her as an accomplice. Rita and Jet said they didn't hear anything, but they were up all night— they could be lying, or have not heard the true culprit, or maybe they just waited for people to walk past them for breakfast, or went the other way around the ship and didn't get caught. It's— we're a crime family, I mean, stuff like this would be... easy. It could be the stupid Dark Matters wall bots, for all we know."

Nureyev has been watching me this whole time. He sighs dramatically, and drapes himself against the wall— he drapes himself against everything. It's hard to use another word. He's just like that. "Even a great detective like yourself can't solve my case? Truly, I'm out of luck. I reside in the very depths of despair."

I try hard not to smile, and fail. I walk up to him, arms extended, palms up. He takes my hands. "Well, I guess we can always re-disorganize your room. If the culprit tries again, they're more likely to make a mistake."

Nureyev tilts his head to the side, smiles that fox's smile. I wonder how much he knows.

"That sounds like a lovely plan. And, of course, I could use your help with that, detective. If I may...?"

He walks ahead, and I'm left thinking again about luck and the bad run of it

the crew is having today. But I think Nureyev's got the worst by far— not much worse luck than asking the culprit to investigate the crime.









RETROUVAILLE

by spicy4verde

Reuniting was an experience that the Carte Blanche had become all too familiar with. On the surface it appeared to present itself like a freshly healed wound caused by a vicious set of events. Underneath it resides a layer of memories that only the victim, of what for some can be considered a traumatic attack on both inner and outer body, can witness. There are many forms that reuniting can take, but in an instance such as this one, it decides to morph itself into something positive. That thing is a best friend.

The crime family had been enjoying their morning at the breakfast table. They were both feeding their hunger and input to each other with recipes and stories galore. It appeared as though it could go on for hours, but Buddy stood from her seat, closely examining the melancholic behavior her family was currently possessing, and all of the noise that resided inside the echoing kitchen had suddenly stopped. Buddy had quickly grown a smile upon her face like an ethereal house plant, and began to speak as the world around her stood still.

"From what I've been able to gather, it appears that everyone's morning has been going well, but I am unfortunately going to have to cease this family bonding time."

Vespa looked up from her comms with concern on her face.

"Buddy, what's going on?" She asked as she turned the comms off and placed it next to her plate. Buddy picked up her glass filled with a floral scented wine meant for early birds such as herself.

"Now I know *some* of you may come to argue against my decision, but I have made my final choice. Each one of you will visit an old friend of yours for the day, and not one of you will remain on this ship."

Peter Nureyev paused himself from taking another bite of his food to input his opinion. "What if we don't have a friend to visit?" Buddy picked up her plate and began walking over to the sink.

"Pair up with someone, Pete. I'm sure one of your acquaintances will let you travel with them."

Nureyev instantly turned towards Juno, who was about to stuff a piece of pancake into his mouth when he noticed his love staring into what felt like his soul. "What?"

Peter scooted his chair closer to Juno. "May I accompany you to see your friend, dear Juno?" Juno placed the piece in his mouth and sat his fork down.

"I'm just going to see Mick in Oldtown, but sure." Nureyev placed his into Juno's, a feeling of softness sweeping between the two of them, even if neither of them spoke another word.

"Well," Buddy began, "you all better get going, I'm sure your buddies are waiting for you! When you're ready to come home to the ship, call me on your comms, and I'll program the ship to arrive there **ASAP!**" She let out a soft laugh as the others cleaned up and made their way to leave. Almost all of them left in pairs. Buddy went with Vespa, and Juno went with Nureyev. Jet and Rita went by themselves. Almost everyone felt thrilled to be visiting their loved one as they left.

The first members of the crime family to arrive at their destination were Juno and Nureyev. Tracking Mick down was not a tedious task, as when the two of them decided to have lunch at the Pour and Floor, they noticed Mick sitting by himself at the bar. Mick, who when he turns to see the incomers, almost begins to *sob* at the mere sight of Juno. Two years of loneliness with the thought that either your only two friends are dead, or they want nothing to do with you can sometimes cause undesirable consequences. However, he wasn't upset for long, as Juno vaguely told him where he'd been and introduced Nureyev to him. The entire day was like a fireplace that had finally been lit after years of abandonment. On a few occasions the memories flooding into Juno's head were too much to bear, but he made it through dry-faced until he had to tell him goodbye to Mick. The flood came quicker than he thought, but they were *happy tears*, and at least Mick gave them his current info to keep in touch.

The second member to arrive was Jet. Although many of his friends were *long* gone, one or two of them as a direct result of his actions, he was able to track down some of his old drinking buddies from the good old days. They sat and talked, and as one of his friends offered to buy him a drink, Jet turned to the waiter and asked for some jehovian tea. They ended the day by visiting a restaurant where they talked to their soul's content. Museums, stores, and whatever else they could find. Jet began to realize that, by having moments where revisiting things that uplift people and remind them that they are human, he can be made to be better, that's what mattered the most alongside *many* other things.

The third member to arrive was Rita, and Hyperion City welcomed her with open arms. From the moment she left the ship, she had two people in mind that she knew for a fact she was going to visit. Franny, and her Mom. She chose to visit Franny first, who was **beyond** thrilled to find her old friend at her doorstep. Franny invited her in, and the two of them talked for hours. Before she let

Rita go, she gave her a free moonstone reading, which informed the two of them that happiness was on the horizon, and Rita gave her a comforting hug in return. Rita's Mother was there when Rita arrived. The sight of her seeing her daughter at her doorstep made her cry, and, just like with Franny, Rita and her mom talked for hours and caught up from where they left off a year ago, like no time had passed at all. When Rita came back to the ship, she brought with her a couple of gifts from both Franny and her Mother combined.

Buddy and Vespa were the last ones to get back on the ship. Vespa had no one to visit, which put her into a mixed mood of both anger and sadness brought on by painful memories from long ago, but Buddy assured her that everything was going to be fine, for Buddy's mother had been expecting them. When they did, Vespa was mesmerized with the appearance of her wife's mother. They were almost an exact copy of each other, aside from a few key differences. Buddy's mom, who told Vespa to call her "Meraki", invited the two of them in for a home cooked meal that she had "poured her heart and soul into". After a while of catching up over a few years of lost time, the three of them traveled into town. Buddy, upon seeing the newest installations since her last attendance home, felt a new kind of awe she hadn't experienced since she was a child. It was nice to be back, but after a while the longing to reunite with her crime family began to overtake her, and it was almost becoming too noticeable, and Vespa felt the same way. Her wife's little home planet was nice, but she also began to long to go back to the ship. The two of them said their goodbyes to Meraki, Buddy's daughterly hug replacing a thousand words, and returned to the ship and, eventually, Outer Space.

After a while of being on the ship, each member of the family stopped with the new memories they made that day, knowing they would remain with them forever, and *that* for some of them it meant healing over the smaller, bad ones. As each one of them fell deeply into sleep, they knew one thing for certain...

No matter where they'd end up, a piece of these moments would always remain.







LET IT GO (THIS TOO SHALL PASS)

by nottodaylogic

Services at the synagogue last, in Juno's opinion, waaaay too long.

He leans against Benten's side, hearing a small groan from his twin. They're of one mind. It's been *hours* now. He's *hungry* and *bored* and he wants to eat the challah already! He's starting to think that the holiday isn't worth the two days off from school they get—not if this is what he has to sit though.

The Rabbi pulls out some kiddush cups and a loaf of challah, and immediately both he and Benten sit up straighter. If the blessings are being read, this must mean the services are ending soon! Juno feels the vibration of Ben's legs bouncing against the floor impatiently.

Finally, after what feels like another hour, the rabbi bids them all a *shanah tovah* and they can go. Immediately, Benzaiten tugs on Juno's hand until they're both standing. Sarah raises her eyebrows at them before doing the same. Luckily for them, she doesn't stop to greet anyone on their way out of the sanctuary.

There's challah sliced and ready to eat just outside, but to the twins' dismay, Sarah Steel guides them past the food and out of the synagogue. "Don't want to spoil your lunch. You know I have lunch waiting, we've talked about this."

Juno is absolutely sure he's never been so hungry in his four-year-old life. Beside him, Ben kicks rocks across the sidewalk, not energetic enough to skip for once.

"Almost there, little monsters. Just a few minutes." She sounds tired, but Juno is too young to recognize the tone. All he knows is that they aren't home yet.

After what feels like a hundred years, they arrive at the apartment. Getting upstairs is a bumbling affair, with both twins complaining more about using the stairs with each passing flight—despite knowing full well Sarah has never felt it worth using the elevator when they're only on the second floor—but soon enough it's the three of them and the apartment.

Immediately, Juno and Ben rush for the table. Sarah pulls the synth-grown apples and syrup she uses in the place of honey from the fridge, shutting the door with her hip. Most refrigerators don't have doors—they're too high-tech for that—but it's the newest model of the kind she had growing up. She says it makes her feel more at home.

Juno doesn't know how anything could make her *not* feel at home in the apartment, but he's never really had to think about those things. After all, his mom works for Northstar Entertainment. The apartment is the only place he has ever lived, so it feels like the exact picture of home to him.

There's a round challah waiting for them on the already-set table. Sarah doesn't bake, so it's store-bought, but it's the same kind she buys every Friday so Juno doesn't mind. It smells like Judaism and fresh golden raisins. He sits down and tears off a piece, only for Sarah to shake her head at him.

"Hold on a minute, Juno." She's smiling faintly. "At least wait until we've said the blessings, impatient little monster."

"Oh," he replies faintly, dropping the challah. Ben, who had also been reaching for it, pulls his hand back with a sheepish look on his face. He grins apologetically, future award-winning Galaxy's Best Smile on display for all to see. It doesn't do much for him, but it does make Sarah laugh.

The blessings aren't hurried, but it's a close thing. With the food now close enough to almost—almost—taste, Juno and Ben try their very best to get through them as quickly as they can. Sarah, however, doesn't speed up at all. They have to wait for her to finish before they can move on.

Finally, Sarah rips off her own chunk of challah and raises it high; Juno mimics her, not knowing how to do anything else. Benten kicks his shins in anticipation as they say the *Hamotzi*, filled with energy and lacking the means to dispel it. "Well? To a good new year."

And with that, they eat.

That year, of course, only brings Turbo and Andromeda to the table.

None of the holidays since—including, and especially, Rosh Hashanah—have felt quite the same.

"Hey, Rita, get out of the kitchen before you start messing with the challah again."

"I do not mind her presence," Jet insists, continuing to knead away at the dough despite the conversation. "She is helping."

"Yeah, Boss!" Rita sticks her tongue out at Juno, which is incredibly unfair. He speaks from experience here. Jet's presence is the only thing keeping him

from returning the gesture—hell, what's the point? The big guy never had any respect for the little street cred Juno has. He sticks his tongue right back at her. She just makes another face. "I'm helpin' him!"

"Yeah? Well, I still remember that time you put your *Salmon Dusty Crunchies: Extra Powder Edition* in the dough when I wasn't looking and they got all burnt. Keep an eye on her," he tells Jet. It was after the HCPD, a year or so before Miasma, on one of the few good brain days he'd had in a while. He'd invited Rita over to celebrate. It'd been the first moderately *good* holiday in a long time, and it had stayed that way for a few years more.

"But boss, it tasted so good!"

Jet shrugs. "I will make two loaves. This means you will have double the circle metaphors to employ. Also, double the challah. Does that dissuade your concerns?"

Good luck with that, big guy, Juno thinks to himself, but he nods. "Yeah, just don't let her near the raisin loaf."

"I must inform you that cannot promise that she will not get near it."

...and that's a no. Juno just sighs. "Whatever, have fun."

"We sure will, Boss!" Rita's mouth is full, but Juno has no clue what she could be eating. The best possible option is raw dough. He's not optimistic.

He shakes his head, leaving them to their preparations. They'll have it ready to eat by the time tomorrow's services are over, salmon snacks or not.

He continues towards the hall, where he can faintly hear the sounds of Buddy practicing on her shofar. She won't be playing it for a few days yet—on Yom Kippur, when they won't be able to stop by a planet for services—but by now he knows she never does anything without having practiced it at least twenty times first. The door is closed, but evidently she can hear him anyway, because the horn-playing stops.

"You'll be wanting to get a move on, Juno," Buddy says breathlessly from the other side of the door. "You have errands to run."

"Shanah tovah to you too," he calls back.

"Now now, you know very well that's not until—" "It's a joke, Buddy."

"Really? I was making one too. Perhaps I've been spending too much time with our dear Jet." Buddy laughs. "No such thing. It must be your sense of

humor at fault, then."

"Excuse me?"

"You are, in fact, excused. Go ahead. Hurry along, now."

Juno can't help but feel slightly rushed as he continues away from her door. He couldn't see her, so he's not sure, but he'd *swear* she made a shooing gesture when she said that.

Whatever. She's right, anyways. He does have errands to run.

Of course, however, he's only made it four steps before he bumps into Vespa. She lets out a cry, almost dropping the pile of fancy plates she's holding. *Oops*. "Agh, hey! Watch where you're going, Steel!"

"Oh! Uh, sorry, Vespa" Juno steps back, hands in the air. "Er, you need any help there?"

"Not from *your* clumsy ass," she growls. "Remember when I tried to get you to help with Sikulaq's birthday present?"

"Really, I try not to." He grins sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. "Ah. Sorry about that." It really doesn't seem to help. Vespa just rolls her eyes at him one more time before making her way back down the hall.

Whatever.

Juno arrives in the garage a few minutes later, having stopped to grab his purse from his room along the way. Inside, leaning against the Ruby-7 in a way that would infuriate the big guy had he known about it, is Nureyev. The drama queen. Juno resists the urge to make fun of him for it, settling for grinning at him knowingly. "Hey, Ransom."

"Ah, Juno!" Nureyev leans over and pecks him quickly on the cheek. Frankly, Juno finds this lame, so he doesn't waste any time pulling Nureyev in by his ruffled shirt for a better, longer kiss. His lips taste faintly of cloned raisins. "I trust you have everything?"

"What kinda novice Jew do you think I am?"

"I'm fairly sure having a wallet has nothing to do with it, love."

"Yeah, well, at least it means I wasn't planning on stealing 'em, Ransom."

Nureyev scoffs. "Well, I wouldn't say I was *planning* on it. I simply hadn't thought that far ahead."

"Buddy specifically made sure to tell you we'd be buying them! With money!"

"Bad habits, detective. That's all." Nureyev spun the keys around his nimble fingers, then shot Juno a grin, showcasing his pointed teeth. "Shall we?"

Juno sighs, making no attempt to hide his own smile. *Hashem,* he loves that man. "Let's go."

The surface of the harvest planet Ceres is filled with orchards of the only noncloned fruit for galaxies. All sorts of genetically engineered berries, vegetables, fruits, and grains are grown there. Nureyev drives the Ruby-7 down towards a landing pad near an orchard section. The apples hang low on the trees, heavy and fresh. It smells of growing things, of the apple juice Juno can see people making, of overgrown plants. Juno inhales, the air crisp in his lungs.

Beside him, Nureyev is still, looking around with an expression of awe. "I must admit, Juno. I have been to a great many planets, and still more wondrous places upon them—cities, museums, incalculable banks, to name a few. And yet, I don't believe I've been anywhere quite like this."

Juno lets out a sigh of a laugh. "Yeah? Try living on a dustball like Mars your whole life. I don't even think I've had anything that hasn't been cloned before."

"Well!" Nureyev beams at him, mirth shining in his eyes. "I believe we'll have to rectify that now, mm?"

He extends his hand towards Juno, palm up.

Tomorrow, they'll wake up earlier than they'd prefer and head down to a planet where nobody knows their faces, but welcomes them anyway. The services they attend will be *far* too long for Rita, and she'll whisper complaints into Juno's ear the whole time, growing progressively louder the longer she sits. The people sitting around them will glare. Buddy will turn her head to Vespa in an effort to hide her laughter, and Juno knows he wouldn't notice her mirth if not for the almost-a-whole-year-now he's spent in the Aurinko Crime Family. Jet will attempt to pay full attention, but Rita'll likely pull him into a game of quiet rock-holo-gun, and he'll happily concede.

She'll win every game.

Juno will put his head on Nureyev's shoulder, ignoring Vespa's eye-rolls. Nureyev'll squeeze his hand and whisper to him about every difference in tradition from how he was raised. Juno'll reply with stories of all the people in attendance, guessing at what they do, what their lives are like.

None of their lives can have anything on his. It's not perfect, but nothing ever

could be. What he has, though, is something much, *much* better than he'd ever have thought possible.

In the present, however, he simply takes the hand offered to him and lets Nureyev guide him into the tree-lined paths of the orchard. Along the way he plucks a particularly ripe apple from its branch. The juice runs down his chin, tart yet sweeter than he would have thought possible. It hardly needs the honey they'll dip it in.

And for what feels like the first time, but is more likely just the first time he's properly noticed, Juno feels completely at home.









A STITCH IN TIME

by Zannolin (with art by navyblueart)

Peter Nureyev has never much been one for observing holidays of any kind. They change and shift so easily from planet to planet that keeping track of them outside of heist purposes always seemed pointless, really. It's not as though he's ever had anyone to celebrate them with, not for a very long time. As for birthdays, well, it's a bit hard to commemorate growing a year older when you don't even know your own age, let alone the day you were born on. The only one he's ever bothered with outside of cons and knowledge stockpiled for jobs was Juno's, and just once.

Even then, Peter's no expert on birthdays, but he doesn't imagine anonymously delivering a bouquet recalling your married aliases from a heist gone horrifically awry as some half-baked bundle of mixed signals, a *fuck you for breaking my heart* and an admission of *you still hold all those tiny shattered pieces* rolled into one, is traditional in any sense.

Perhaps that is what makes him so apprehensive when Rita suggests the crew throw a Christmas party. *Suggests* might be too generous a word, really. Peter Nureyev has stopped an unstoppable train before, but even he has to admit there's no derailing Rita when she gets that manic sparkle in her eyes. It's more like Rita has decided that the *Carte Blanche* will be having a Christmas party, and the rest of them must simply live with it.

Peter, for his part, suffers from what he refuses to acknowledge as *nerves* on the matter. He's been to hundreds of the most opulent parties across the galaxy before, but a Christmas party with — with *family?* He finds that for the first time in years, he doesn't have a clue on how to behave, or even *pretend* to behave. Even when Rita pulls him aside to explain in a very enthusiastic lessthan-whisper that it's her excuse to surprise Juno for his birthday — *he doesn't like to have people makin' a big fuss, Mistah Ransom, see, so I figured if I made it more about everyone else, Mistah Steel would be happier! — Peter can't help but fight against a creeping worry that he'll <i>mess up,* somehow.

This isn't something he can study and prepare for, like a heist or a con. He is completely out of his element in every aspect, and that bothers him a great deal more than he cares to admit.

Mostly, they're just going to have a family dinner like always, then watch a stream like always — although Rita has declared, well out of Juno's earshot, that they'll be watching *Bad Cops 3: The Legend of Good Cop*, since one ex-detective

is still incensed they skipped it on their last marathon.

That doesn't stop Peter from pacing in his quarters every day for the week between Rita's no-so-secret announcement and the set date of the party. He hasn't the slightest idea of what to give Juno, or anyone else for that matter, so it's a horrible kind of relief when Juno shuffles into the kitchen the morning of, blearily pours himself a cup of coffee, and announces to no one in particular, "No presents."

"Whaddaya mean, boss?" Rita asks around a mouthful of — is that toast topped with salmon chips? Dear lord.

Juno's eye narrows. "Don't try to pull one over on me, Rita, I know you're not going to let my birthday go by without trying to do something."

Rita pretends to swipe a tear from her eye. "Aw, you know me so well, Mistah Steel."

"I also know I can't stop you, so fine. Do your thing. But no presents."

"Not even-"

"Rita, I don't want any birthday presents, all right?"

"Sheesh, fine, boss, you don't have to get all grumpy about it."

"Juno hasn't drunk his coffee yet, darling," Buddy yawns, entering the kitchen with Vespa in tow. "Grumpy is his default state."

"Hey—" Juno starts, sounding mildly offended, but Buddy breezes past him, plucking the coffee out of his grip and handing it to Vespa. "Buddy!"

One look from Vespa shuts him up, and the matter is settled. No presents.

That night, after a less-than-grand family dinner (which would have been worse had Juno not been willing to step in and prevent Peter, on weekly meal duty, from burning all their food. *Again*.) the crew of the *Carte Blanche* gathers in the lounge, prepared to settle down for an evening of constant chatter from Juno and Rita about *Bad Cops 3: The Legend of Good Cop*.

Instead, they find Rita bouncing on her toes in the middle of the room, Jet at her side, looking entirely too pleased with herself.

"I know we all said no presents," Rita begins, clasping her small hands to her chest and grinning, "but I just couldn't stop myself."

Beside her, Jet pulls a large box out from behind the couch, and every eyebrow in the room rises by a hair.

"Mistah Jet helped a little," says Rita, practically hopping with excitement as Jet moves to open the box. There's a rustle of tissue paper and a veritable waterfall of glitter, and Rita practically dives in headfirst to pull out a lumpy armful of vibrant red and green yarn.

Sweaters.

"Rita, darling, wherever did you—" Buddy begins, the eye not hidden behind her hair widening in surprise.

"I made 'em," Rita declares, beaming. She hands a forest green sweater to Vespa, and the scarlet one to Buddy. Jet helpfully reaches into the box again to pass Rita bundles of gold and pink so bright Peter nearly has to blink spots out of his vision.

"This one's mine," Rita explains, voice muffled behind a wall of slightly crooked stitches. "Mistah Jet made it all on his own!"

"You assisted me on the sleeves," Jet interjects mildly, accepting the brown sweater Rita, still half in and half out of her pink monstrosity, has leaned back into the box to retrieve for him.

"Everybody needs a lil' help with the sleeves on their first try," Rita replies, sounding surprisingly sage for someone with the rhinestones on their glasses stuck in glittery, hot pink yarn. "You did a very good job, Mistah Jet."

Peter can't say for sure, but he thinks Jet is smiling. At the very least, the crow's feet around his eyes have deepened, and the usually stern line of his mouth seems softer than normal.

"However did you manage to make six sweaters in a week, Miss Rita?" Peter asks. He had tried to learn knitting once for a very long game con, and the number of dropped stitches and times he tangled the yarn irreparably had nearly driven him to madness. By the end of it, he

could barely make a potholder, much less a sweater — much less six!

"Five," Rita corrects, bouncing over to where Juno sits beside Peter on the sofa. "Ooo, here boss, you've *gotta* put this on, I made it all yellow an' pretty like that gown ya wore for our first heist!"

"Rita-"

"Be quiet and put on your sweater, boss," Rita says sternly, and Juno's mouth snaps shut. Peter is once again reminded he never wants to make Rita angry.

"Be that as it may," he interjects, cutting off any retort Juno might attempt, "that is an incredible amount of work for one person. It shouldn't be possible."

Rita shrugs, finally tugging her sweater on all the way. It clashes horribly with the bright red of her huge glasses frames, and though Peter knows the part of him he has ferociously cultured and refined should cringe away and curl his lip, he can't help but feel a fond smile threatening to break out across his face.

"A stitch in time saves nine!" Rita sing-songs, returning to the box one final time.

"What-"

"I find it is best not to question her logic," Jet says, gently folding his sweater over his arm. "It will inevitably win in the end. You will at least save yourself a headache this way."

"Fair enough," Peter murmurs. He's saved from more thoughts of Rita's logic — or any thoughts at all, really — by Rita herself, who skips across the room to him with a midnight blue sweater bundled in her arms.

She holds it out to him, grinning, and Peter finds himself quite at a loss for words, thoughts, and breath.

"This one's yours, Mistah Ransom," Rita says softly.

He takes it gently, a part of him wondering distantly if this is all just a dream, worrying that if he holds it too closely, handles the yarn too roughly, it will all melt away and he'll wake up on a star hauler somewhere, or back on Brahma, or in that hotel room nearly two years ago now.

The yarn is thick and soft, the stitching a bit lumpy, but neat and painstaking nonetheless. Peter runs a hand over it and is horrified to feel tears pricking at the corners of his eyes.

"Thank you, Miss Rita," he manages, feeling every last concerned and

confused gaze snagging on him in the otherwise silent lounge. He's a loose stitch, standing out in this atmosphere of light and warmth and joy.

He's never had anything like this before, not even in his earliest memories.

"You're very welcome, Mistah Ransom," she tells him, and by her voice Peter knows that Rita understands.

A moment that has gone on for far too long (and yet not nearly long enough) finally passes, and Rita is back to full manic energy, eyes sparkling and lime green nails tapping together excitedly.

"Oh, oh!! I forgot to mention! Everyone check inside your collars!"

Everyone, Rita included — which doesn't quite work, considering she's wearing her own — go to look at the collars of their sweaters. Peter peers at the dark yarn and his eyebrows jump up as he sees the small, crooked "Peter Ransom" stitched inside the collar in shimmering letters.

Peter finds that swallowing is quite a task, for more than just one reason. He brushes a single fingertip against the letters, just barely tracing the curve of the *R*.

"Rita," Juno says beside him, sounding particularly put out. Everyone who knows him, though, knows a deep and years-old affection lurks behind the exasperation. "What is this."

Rita giggles, and Peter cranes his neck over Juno's hunched shoulder to see, despite Juno's best efforts, the shimmering gold stitching within his own sweater that reads "Boss Lady".

"Well it's not wrong, dear," Peter says mildly, glad for the distraction, and *oofs* when Juno elbows him in the ribs.

"Don't *encourage* her, Ransom," he grumbles, and though that name makes Peter's skin itch, he smiles fondly and leans more of his weight onto Juno's shoulder.

"Oh, but I love it when you're bossy," Peter whispers, letting the words carry just a hint of Rex Glass, because he knows it will get a reaction out of Juno.

He's right. Juno's nose scrunches and his shoulders rise, and he splutters, smacking Peter in the mouth with one of his sweater's sleeves. The Peter Nureyev of a year ago would be concerned about smudged lipstick and the principal of it all, but here and now he finds a delighted laugh bubbling up from somewhere behind his sternum.

Later, curled up against Juno's side and listening more attentively to his commentary on the stream he's chosen rather than the stream itself, Peter breathes deeply and feels the ever-present tightness in his chest ease, just a fraction.

Maybe holidays aren't so bad after all.

Peter's arm and one of his feet are asleep and he himself is halfway there by the time the stream winds down and the rest of the crew begins sleepily standing up to return to their respective cabins to tumble into bed. Juno is more awake than Peter, but he's beginning to settle into his late-night sloth mode, as Peter likes to call it. Slow to move, very clingy, and extremely grumpy if disturbed.

He rouses himself, though not without a fair amount of groaning, and gathers his sweater and a blanket in his arms, making his way back towards what are officially Juno's quarters, but what everyone knows to be *theirs*. Peter shakes his foot out as elegantly as he can manage and rises to follow, but a hand grasping at his sleeve stops him.

Instinctively, he stiffens, has to fight to keep his shoulders from curling in and stop himself from jerking his wrist away from the contact. Ever since Miasma, well...the pains might be phantom most of the time, but it still hurts enough that he won't even wear bracelets anymore.

Peter takes in a steadying breath and looks down at Rita, who gazes up at him with glasses askew and chin half-hidden in her monstrously pink sweater.

"Can I talk to you for a sec, Mistah Ransom?" she asks, very quietly. Peter nods, somewhat baffled and sleep-muzzed, and allows himself to be led out into the corridor towards the *Blanche*'s small kitchen.

"I figured you ain't never had much of a Christmas present before," she says, fiddling with one of her cuffs, "at least it seemed that way, what with you bein' so nervous and all—"

(Oh God, everyone knew he was nervous. He's going to die.)

"—so I thought maybe I could do a little somethin' to make your first one real special."

Peter blinks.

"What-"

"Here," Rita says, and she gently pulls the sweater from Peter's arms. In the semi-darkness of the corridor, the midnight blue of the yarn looks more like a puddle of shadow, fit to hide in.

Appropriate, really.

Carefully, Rita turns the sweater upside down and tilts it just so, and new letters gleam to life, cleverly disguised in the clumsy stitching of an alias he regrets.

Peter Nureyev stares down at his own name, shining up at him from a handmade sweater in the gloom of the ship he now calls home, and something settles behind his ribs, like the contented creak of a ship that has weathered this storm and knows it will handle the next just as well.

Usually Peter is the one doing the stealing around here — he's the professional thief, after all. But with a few tiny stitches, Rita has stolen every word he could try to muster, all of them but two.

"Thank you," he whispers, and hopes that two such simple, inadequate words

can encapsulate the ocean of emotion that froths within his chest. He feels a single tear slip down his cheek, probably well on its way to ruining his mascara, but Peter finds that he doesn't care.

And then Rita is hugging him, the sweater crushed between them, and everything is a little blurred from the tears and the quiet giggles that neither can seem to contain.

"You're welcome," Rita whispers. "Merry Christmas, Mistah Nureyev."

Peter's heart sings.



He doesn't bother to stop by his quarters to clean up or fix his makeup as he normally would. In fact, for once in his life, Peter Nureyev might not even care how he looks right now. His footsteps are light and his heart is lighter, and right now the only thing he wants is to be able to look at the face he finds more beautiful than anything else in the galaxy.

The door to Juno's guarters slides open as he presses the keypad, and Juno

turns to face him, eyepatch undone and looking more lovely than anyone should ever have a right to. He's put on the sweater from Rita, and the sunflower color suits him wonderfully.

"You all right, honey?" Juno asks, eye darting over what is sure to be the disaster of Peter's makeup, the way he cradles Rita's gift in one arm like it's bound to break at the slightest jostle.

I just might be more all right than I ever have been in my life, Peter thinks, a little wildly.

It's what he means to say.

Instead, when he opens his mouth, what comes out is, "I love you."

This isn't how he planned it. He's been trying for so long now to find the perfect way to say what he feels to his detective. Ex-detective.

His Juno.

Last time, he hadn't exactly planned to say it either. It had slipped out in a moment of honesty, of vulnerability, and he had meant it with every ounce of his being. But then Juno had left, and even though this isn't the same Juno Steel who left him aching and empty in a hotel room almost two years ago, something has always held him back from letting those three simple, earth-shattering words out again.

"Nureyev," Juno breathes, and Peter doesn't remember which one of them crossed the room or if they met in the middle or if the room has somehow shrunk so it contains only the two of them and nothing else, but Juno's hands are cupping his face and Peter's eyes are full of tears and he has never felt more right.

"Happy birthday, darling," Peter whispers. "I love you."

Juno kisses him, hard and searching and perfect, and Peter thinks they're both crying now.

They break apart after a moment, breathing ragged and shaky from the tears and the kiss and the overwhelming reality of it all. Gently, ever so gently, Juno takes Peter's right wrist in his hand, slow enough that Peter can pull back if it pains him. Peter doesn't. After a moment, Juno raises it to his lips, gazing up at Peter all the while, and presses a featherlight kiss to his pulse point.

The stops and starts and wrong turns it took to get here are as improbable as the constellations, surely, and as insignificant as their own tiny lives in a

universe so massive, but Peter feels Juno mouth the words *I love you* against his fluttering, speeding pulse, and he has never felt so alive, so *real* in his life. This must be the way things were intended to be, because in this moment, he cannot imagine a universe in which Peter Nureyev is not hopelessly, wildly in love with Juno Steel.

Peter never wants to let go, never wants this moment to end.

But he also can't wait for the next, and the next, a lifetime stretching onwards with Juno Steel.

Later, curled together in bed, Peter presses his nose to the back of Juno's neck and inhales the scent of him, his solid and present warmth in Peter's arms, tucked up against his chest. It feels more natural than anything he has ever done.

Peter Nureyev is a thief by trade. It is for both his job and his enjoyment that he often finds himself in places he was never meant to be, picking the lock and slipping into forbidden rooms. He was never meant to belong — he wasn't made for that. But when he creeps into Juno Steel's heart and arms and bed, he cannot shake the feeling that he is inexplicably *home*.



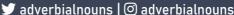






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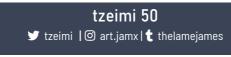
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